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ABSTRACT

According to a national survey of 1,200 adults conducted between November 1984 and January 1985, Americans are solidly in favor of raising standards for graduation from junior and senior high schools, even if the changes result in the failure of their own children to graduate. The respondents were not willing to support these reforms if they were paid for by closing schools or by eliminating existing extracurricular programs, but indicated that they would be willing to pay higher taxes to implement the new standards. Fewer than half of the respondents favored lengthening the school year or the school day. Those surveyed also favored requiring teachers to pass state or national tests and to participate in professional development activities during the summer. Respondents supported raising teachers' salaries, offering merit pay, or both; limiting class sizes; assigning disruptive students to alternative environments; and having teachers encourage students' personal growth. The majority of those polled gave their own local high schools a grade of B or better. The respondents were 81 percent white and 58 percent women; 52 percent had attended college; and their age and geographic distribution were representative of the United States population in general. (PGD)

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RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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Emerson Elliott, Acting Director

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Public Supports Tougher School Standards

During the past two years everyone has been talking about improving education. Everything from merit pay to a longer school year to tougher graduation requirements have been proposed, and in many places, implemented.

Just how far is the American public willing to go to raise academic standards in this country? Pretty far, according to a recent survey sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE).

'Participants said they would be quite willing to pay increased taxes to attain their preferred reforms, but would be unwilling to forgo extracurricular activities or to have their local schools closed,' according to experts from Michigan State University who designed the survey.

Also, according to the survey:

-- 95 percent favor requiring students to pass reading and math tests before they can graduate from high school or be promoted from junior high school;

-- More than 80 percent favor graduation exams even if this would mean their child never received a regular high school diploma because s/he was unable to pass the test;

-- However, more than half said they would not support these reforms if the school board would pay for them by closing schools or eliminating athletics or other extracurricular activities;

-- Fewer than half of those polled favored increasing the school day by one hour or the school year by one month.

The survey was conducted to determine which reforms the public is likely to support in order to improve academic standards in secondary schools and to see how willing it is to bear the costs that go along with implementing those reforms.

Researchers surveyed 1,200 adults between November of 1984 and January of this year. Michigan State University designed the poll at the direction of NIE, and Market Opinion Research Corp., of Detroit conducted the survey.

The majority of those polled strongly support graduation and promotion tests even if such tests would have negative personal or social costs.

However, the majority appear more willing to risk personal consequences than social ones. For example, 92 percent of those favoring graduation tests said they would continue to support the tests even if their own child failed the test the first time. But, only 75 percent said they would support the tests if half the low-income students failed on their first try, and if it meant some low-income students would never receive a diploma because they were unable to pass the test.

Seventy-one percent of those surveyed thought students should be assigned 1 1/2 hours of homework every day and the majority favored requiring students to take courses recommended by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in order to graduate. These include three years of math; a half year of computer science; four years of English; three years of social studies and science; and two years of foreign languages for college-bound students.

Students aren't the only ones the public thinks should be tested and held accountable. Eighty-four percent of those surveyed believe teachers should be required to pass State or national teacher exams. A majority (81) percent also favor

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having teachers spend one month each summer doing things to improve their teaching skills.

While the public does want teachers to meet higher standards, it also is willing to pay them more to do so. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed strongly support raising teachers' salaries to an average of $25,000 a year and/or offering merit pay to teachers.

The public also supports making some changes in the classroom. For instance, 85 percent favored limiting the size of a class to 25 or fewer students. A majority also felt that students who continually disrupt a class should be assigned to alternative classrooms rather than expelled.

Although the majority believe schools should stress academics, they also believe that teachers should try to encourage personal growth by helping their students to develop self-understanding, creativity and self-confidence.

And, finally, the respondents rated their local high school for overall operations. The majority (44.1 percent) gave their school a B, while 16.7 percent gave their school an A.

The polling sample looked like this: 81 percent were white; 46 percent said their family income was between $10,000 and $30,000; 58 percent were women; and 52 percent said they had either graduated from college or had attended college. Although the age and geographic distribution of the respondents were generally representative of the U.S. population, the percent of the respondents with a college-level education was higher than that of the U.S. population.

A preliminary report of the findings is available by sending a self-addressed label to Enid Brown Herndon, Market Opinion Survey, National Institute of Education, Mail Stop 1809, 1200 19th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20208.

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Research in Brief editor: Kay McKinney, NIE, 1200 19th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20208.

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